

now well known: Scots-Irish ancestors, growing up outside Wingham, Ontario, her mother's debilitating Parkinson's disease (contracted when Alice was about twelve), two years on a scholarship at the University of Western Ontario, marriage to James Munro and their move to British Columbia, difficult years as a housewife struggling to write fiction (including, at publishers' urging, misdirected efforts to produce a novel), three children (plus one who died shortly after birth), dissolution of her twenty-year marriage, her return to Ontario, a second marriage, and increasing critical acclaim and popular success as a writer of short stories. In Thacker's view, the decisive event in Munro's creative development was her return to Huron County, Ontario, which enabled her to reconnect with her original material and see it anew in a more complex way.

Although Thacker includes some new details of Munro's personal life, he focuses more sharply on her development as a writer and the way she makes use of her life in her work, published and unpublished. He quotes generously from her memoirs and from particularly engaging unpublished drafts of work found in the Munro papers at the University of Calgary, implying that unpublished fragments frequently contain more autobiographical material than what remains in Munro's published stories. Thacker is also sensitive and judicious in examining the published fiction, carefully distinguishing its autobiographical elements from imaginative inventions, which are often stimulated by Munro's research and the experiences of others. In this sifting, Thacker never presumes that the life can "explain" the fiction, implicitly recognizing that the sources of a writer's creativity must remain in some sense unfathomable.

Any writer who has lived a life as relatively private and uneventful as Munro poses problems for her biographer, possibly exacerbated by the fact that she and many of her friends and family are still alive. Although

relations between mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, and adult lovers all figure prominently in Munro's fiction, for example, Thacker tells much more about Munro's relationships with her (dead) mother and father than about her relationships with her own (living) daughters and ex-lovers. His choice is reasonable, though some readers may remain curious. Moreover, Thacker, whose authority derives from his excellent critical writings on Munro, does not offer much in the way of literary analysis here. Looming large in these pages is the publication history of Munro's work—her relations with various editors and book publishers in Canada and the United States, with her agent, and with her editors at the *New Yorker* magazine, which has played an important role in augmenting her readership. Equally prominent are extensive citations from the increasingly laudatory, though sometimes critical reviews of her work. In these citations we see the best efforts of many skillful reviewers (among them prominent writers) to account for the magic of Munro's writing. For all those who care about Alice Munro, this is a rich and fascinating book. It will be the definitive biography of Munro for many years to come.

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## THE COMING OF LILITH: ESSAYS ON FEMINISM, JUDAISM, AND SEXUAL ETHICS, 1972-2003

Judith Plaskow, Ed. with Donna Berman  
Boston: Beacon Press, 2005

### REVIEWED BY JOHANNA STUCKEY

Any publication by prominent American feminist theologian Judith Plaskow is worthy of our close attention, but *The Coming of Lilith* is especially significant. The material included in the book allows us to trace Plaskow's development as a feminist, a Jew, and a theologian from her first encounter with feminism in 1969 to her coming out as a lesbian and her recent work on sexuality. It is a great pleasure to revisit many of Plaskow's early and extremely influential writings on feminist Judaism, feminist theology and anti-Judaism. It is an equally great pleasure to have access to a number of her articles that were previously not readily available. In addition, the collection presents a thorough and exciting overview of Jewish feminist theology.

The book is divided into four sections: Section I, "Formulating a Feminist Theory," contains one of her earliest feminist articles "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology" (1972), which she ends with her feminist story of the usually reviled Lilith. In the next year she was questioning the concept of "women's experience" and arguing for multiplicity of experiences. The final piece in the section, dated 1995, reconsiders her story of Lilith in terms of others' reactions to it and her own understanding of it as fitting into a long Jewish tradition of such interpretive stories. In Section II, "The Complexity of Interlocking Oppressions," we find "Christian

Feminism and Anti-Judaism,” an article that shocked many Christian and non-Christian feminists when it appeared in 1978. The second section also contains articles on Jewish anti-paganism and the need for Jewish feminists to face head on the “hard texts” in the Hebrew Bible, the ones most women at least find “morally repugnant,” like the treatment of Vashti in the Book of Esther or Lot’s offering his virgin daughters to the rape-intent mob in Sodom as a substitute for a male guest in his house. “Creating a Feminist Judaism,” Section III, deals with how Judaism can be changed to be welcoming to women and other minorities. The articles in this section date from 1987 to 2003 and include “Beyond Egalitarianism” (1990), in which Plaskow argues that egalitarianism is not enough and goes on to outline five stages towards “genuine equality.” Another essay in this section deals with the agonizing plight of the *agunot*, “chained women,” abandoned or separated Jewish women whose husbands refuse to give them a Jewish divorce (a *get*) and who therefore cannot remarry. Section IV, “Sexuality, Authority, and Tradition,” concentrates on Jewish and scriptural attitudes to sexuality and homosexuality, with articles dating from 1997 to 2003. Partly as the result of her involvement in the inter-religious and inter-cultural Good Sex Project, Plaskow examines Judaism’s position on sexuality in general and discusses the relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and sexism. Throughout the collection she addresses issues such as the effect of male God language on women, the need to deal with traditional scriptures as male productions, and the problems involved in women’s gaining equality in male religion.

Perhaps the most rewarding article in a volume replete with reward is Plaskow’s warm and self-revelatory introduction to the volume. She calls it “Intersections,” an apt title. She begins by observing that she “cannot separate [her] intellectual journey from [her] personal journey.”

Then she proceeds to demonstrate, through an account of her life from early times to the present, that indeed “the personal is political.” She became a feminist in the fall of 1969, as did so many. At the time she was in her second year of graduate study at Yale University, and the process of consciousness-raising was “life-changing.” As a woman who had cherished an ambition to become a rabbi, she found herself a rabbi’s wife: after one feminist meeting, she “spent half the night weeping, feeling at age twenty-two that [she] had wasted [her] life.” Plaskow lists three main factors that assisted her moving from “an angry sense of powerlessness” to being able to have “a vision of a transformed Judaism.” They were the publication of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her*, Plaskow’s coming out as a lesbian, and the decision of the feminist spirituality collective to which she belonged to stop trying to reach consensus “on how to worship together” and rather to draw on differences in developing prayer and liturgy. She concludes the introduction by contemplating the interconnections in her life, a life that she has lived in deep involvement with feminism and Judaism, herself a major force in the development of feminist theology in North America.

Aside from reprinting most of Judith Plaskow’s important articles on feminist and Jewish feminist theology, the collection also makes available a number of short pieces Plaskow wrote from 1990 to 1996 for *Tikkun: A Bimonthly Jewish and Interfaith Critique of Politics, Culture & Society*. Though these pieces are popular and written to be accessible, they nonetheless address difficult subjects like the ambiguity of God, hierarchy, and Jewish anti-paganism. As the editor says in the Foreword, “Judith’s work is not for the faint-hearted.” Indeed it is not, but, as this collection demonstrates, it is certainly worth the read. Not only does it deal with most issues in feminist theology, but it also tackles

what Plaskow calls “the hard stuff” not just of text, but also, among others, of the maleness of the monotheistic god, the otherness of women that is embedded in the monotheistic traditions, authority and hierarchy in religion, sexual ethics, and gay and lesbian rights. Judith Plaskow is one of the most influential feminist theologians living today. This book demonstrates why.

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## BETWEEN FRIENDS: A YEAR IN LETTERS.

Oonagh Berry and Helen Levine  
Toronto: Second Story Press, 2005

REVIEWED BY CLARA  
THOMAS

In an introduction by Joan Turner, a friend of the authors and their editor, we learn that Oonagh, in her 60s, is a counsellor at the Amethyst Women’s Addiction Centre in Ottawa, and Helen, in her 80s, also in Ottawa, is an activist for women’s causes and in 1989 recipient of the Governor General’s Award for outstanding contributions to improving the Status of Women in Canada. Oonagh was born in Dublin and Helen in Ottawa. Both women are gifted and practised speakers, teachers and writers, and both are married to men who accept and encourage their many activities. They began this friendly project in July of 2001, determined to revive the old letter-writing habit,